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ABSTRACT

This document reports on the implementation of an innovation called "thoughtful teaching and learning" (which means lessons, teaching, class interactions, student-teacher relationships, and student assessment that promote the work of the mind as the prime claim on the curriculum) with a group of district and school administrators in a large urban school district using a nonmodal approach to the change process. The modal change process in education, as described by Sarason and Fullan, typically inhibits innovation rather than fostering it. A nonmodal process was used to introduce the innovation in a series of seminars. The nonmodal process included the following themes: (1) making personal meaning on the part of those affected by the change central to the process; (2) modeling or illustrating the quality or content of the change; (3) developing collegiality or mutuality; and (4) eliminating the use of timelines or restrictions. The following preliminary findings, based on naturalistic observation, are presented: (1) most participants reported that they were uncomfortable when their thinking began to change; (2) although participants did not remark specifically about the modeling effort, their own preliminary ideas about working with their faculties followed the same pattern as the seminar model; (3) participants considered the collegiality of the change effort to be unique and it resulted in out-of-seminar activity; and (4) time was a constant preoccupation of the participants and many felt that they were obligated to achieve certain outcomes within a certain time limit. A list of 10 references is appended. (FMW)

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School Change and Personal Meaning: Provoking "Thoughtful" Teaching and Learning in an Urban District

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Abstract

The problem of this study is that while it is known that the modal change process in education (as described in Sarason's and Fullan's well-known accounts) typically inhibits innovation rather than fostering it, descriptions of alternative change efforts are lacking in the research literature on change. The modal attempt at change, in general, ignores personal meaning; the focus is on the content of the change to the practical exclusion of the process of change.

To avoid the problems associated with the predominant mode of fostering change, the authors made an effort to foster a particular change in an atypical way. The nature of the innovation, involving district and school administrators of a large urban school district in Utah, is so-called "thoughtful teaching and learning." By the phrase is meant lessons, teaching, class interactions, student-teacher relationships, and student assessment that promote the work of the mind as the prime claim on the curriculum. Thoughtful teaching is presumed to avoid learning that is decontextualized, impersonal, disconnected, and trivialized.

Preliminary findings show that participants report distinct differences between typical innovation efforts and the present one. Four categories are defined, into which the findings of the study to date are placed: Personal Meaning; Collegiality; Modeling of the Change Goal; and Time Concerns.

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Educational changes which take individual meaning . . . seriously not only stand a better chance of being implemented; they offer some hope for combating the stagnation, burnout, boredom, and cynicism of professional educators which in the long run will lead to the desiccation of all promising change. (Fullan, 1982, p. 296)

The assertion that "individual meaning is the central issue" (Fullan, p. 295) of school improvement ought to claim our attention if only for the fact that it flies in the face of more usual thinking. The usual aim, to judge by the plethora of brochures, advertisements, and so on that educators receive regularly, is to "produce," often through technology, behavioral outcomes, without much attention to conceptual development on the part of those who are to adopt the innovation.

Marris, a British sociologist, has gone so far as to classify as immoral those attempts at improvement that ignore the development of personal meaning Writing about change agents who reject, out of hand, opposition to their proposed changes, and who demean those persons who resist, Marris writes, "They express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. If they deny others the chance to [give personal meaning to the

proposed changes], they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions." (Marris, 1974, p. 166)

Modal Change

The centrality of individual meaning in any change process, as proposed by Fullan and by Marri, also underlies Sarason's (1982) examination of what he terms the modal (i.e., typical) school change process. The modal approach to innovation has proven wasteful and even counter-productive, according to Sarason. A list of some characteristics of this way of going about change is given below, adapted from Sarason (1982) and Fullan (1982).

1. Typically, change efforts do not take into account the development of personal meaning by those to be affected by the change. Instead, they mandate performance or behavior of one kind or another.

2. The time both predicted and allowed for changes to take place is almost invariably underestimated (Sarason, 1982, pg. 285; Fullan, 1982, p. 293).

3. Change efforts may claim to have as their goal serious cognitive or social-personal alterations, but then not model or illustrate such an outcome; rather, they simply provide verbalizations about the goal. One changes one's vocabulary, but little else. This situation obtains, for example, when a consultant or administrator (or a mediated program) proposes the importance of, say, "higher-order thinking skills" to a group but teaches or presents the idea in such a way that the "learners" are never asked to deal with anything more than the memorization of terms.

4. Failure by change agents to recognize the existence of certain human relationships at the site may lead to a distorted understanding of site realities and consequently to inappropriate efforts to bring about change.

5. Modal change proceeds as if the process were sequential, step-wise and non-recursive.

6. Change agents may try to involve those who have a stake in the proposed changes, as common wisdom encourages, but in inappropriate ways--either manipulatively or mindlessly. This is a form of negative constituency-building (Sarason, 1982).

Non-modal Change in an Urban School District

In an effort to avoid these characteristics of typical change efforts, the authors used a non-modal process in a setting of planned change. In order to find out if any differences were perceived by the participants between the modal approach and this approach, we decided to look at our effort through the lens of naturalistic inquiry.

We will now explain the change process as well as the innovation itself. "Every change," notes Fullan (1982, p. 295), "has two components: an implicit or explicit theory of education (what the change is) and an implicit or explicit theory of change (the process being followed to implement it)." At this point, we'll make explicit both of the theories involved in the present study.

The Theory of Education

The content of the educational change we proposed is captured, admittedly awkwardly, by the phrase, "thoughtful teaching and learning." By it we mean, most directly, beliefs and understandings that value the work of the mind over alternative goals. Thoughtful schools, for example, reduce the mindless use of worksheets and avoid disconnected, trivialized curriculums (see Lanier and Sedlak, 1989). They promote thoughtfulness through such means as essential questions (Wiggins, n.d.), student perplexity (Dillon, 1988), and exhibitions of learning (Wiggins, n.d.; Sizer, 1985). For school administrators in whom this perspective is dominant, the paramount leadership concern is the creation of contexts that promote, or at least do not inhibit, thoughtful schooling.

The view holds that the work of the mind is fundamental to schooling--that it has, in fact, the prime claim on the curriculum. While the perspective values higher-order thinking, it questions so-called thinking "skills," a concept that too often results from a simple-minded reductionism and thus obscures meaningfulness (see Hyde and Bizar, p. 7). The perspective values education as more than a path to the acquisition of consumer goods. It holds perplexity and questioning to be the heart of learning. School leadership itself must be, in the phrase of Richard Gibboney, "rooted in the fundamental enlgihtenment of thought." (1989, p. ?)

The Theory of Change

As to our "theory of change," four themes characterize it. The first theme is central, the other three are of substantial, but lesser, significance.

First, we make personal meaning on the part of those to be affected by the change central to the process. In part this focus is achieved (to whatever degree it is achieved) through considering "thoughtful teaching and learning" as a perspective, rather than as a specific, programmatic innovation. We understand perspectives to be direction-giving frames of reference that drive our actions, particularly influencing the ways in which we receive information, store it, and act on it. They are outlooks or mental views--schemas, in cognitive psychology parlance[1] In Jim Dillon's (1988) terms, educators first envision a practice, then enact it. Envisioning is a matter of adopting a perspective.

The second major theme is modeling or illustrating the quality or content of the change in the actual face-to-face change effort, as opposed to simply talking about the change.

The third theme is collegiality or mutuality. In the present study the following elements were presumed to contribute to its collegiality: We were invited by the superintendent to become involved; participants selected themselves into the change effort (no district pressure was applied); we hold seminars (rather than "inservice sessions"), as a part of which we invite and take seriously participants' questions, comments, and suggestions. The very

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[1] A good example of the significance of perspective (literal, in this case) is a map projection: One projection of the earth's globe onto a two-dimensional surface results in representations of geographical features that are different from those resulting from a different projection. Those differences may be culturally momentous.

goal of the change process has never been stated in behavioral or even particularly specific terms and thus can be negotiated.

The fourth theme is time. Neither we nor district personnel have established a time-line to drive our seminars, nor do we express concerns during the sessions about precisely when a certain degree of "implementation" will have occurred.

Our thinking has been that, as a result of this approach, we will overcome a number of the failings attributable to the modal change process, most importantly, the absence of positive personal meaning on the part of those who are to adopt the proposed change.

The Setting of the Study

In October of 1989, the superintendent of Salt Lake City School District invited the first two authors to become involved in the district's plans for administrator and teacher development. The authors provided him with a statement about thoughtful teaching and learning that would allow principals from the district's 40 schools to choose to attend a series of seminars on creating contexts for mindful teaching. Seven (six elementary, one high school) principals signaled their interest in the project, as well as an assistant superintendent and three other district administrators.

The study takes place in a large, uban school district, comprised of about 24,000 students. There are 27 elementary schools, five intermediate schools, three high schools, and five alternative schools. Four elementary principals are part of the innovation group, as well as two secondary administrators,

four district administrators, two university professors, and one graduate student (the ethnographer).

The participant principals lead a diverse group of school professionals and students, including those associated with an upper middle class, highly traditional school (elementary), a transitional school (elementary) with wealthy families in large, restored homes in the foothills to families in old hotels and homeless shelters, an inner-city elementary school, and an alternative high school (students range from young mothers to ESL students to city and county jail inmates).

Early on, the participants were made aware of several books and articles[2] congruent with the theme of thoughtful or mindful curriculum and instruction. Six seminar sessions have been held to date (one other is planned) with an ethnographer present. The ethnographer also interviews participants on a regular basis. The seminars, attendance at which is purely voluntary, are relatively informal occasions in which attempts are made by the university leaders to reduce any sense of hierarchy. Information is presented and discussed about the idea of thoughtful schooling.

From the beginning the general goal of promoting greater thoughtfulness in classrooms has been clearly voiced by the authors; however, the stating of time-specific or number-specific goals of "implementation" has been avoided.

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2 Dillon, *Questioning and Teaching;* Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think;* Purkey and Novak, *Inviting School Success;* E. Langer, *Mindfulness;* R. Mitchell, "Why Good Grammar?"

The participants themselves choose how they will "implement" the perspective they are (presumably) learning, or even if they will implement it.

Findings to Date[3]

The findings are presented in connection with the four themes (detailed above) that guided the change process adopted by the experimenters. In general the participants have reported strong feelings associated with the enacted change process--generally, but not exclusively, positive. Also, collateral learnings are taking place within the participants--learnings that are not predictable from simply knowing the content of the proposed innovation.

Personal Meaning

1. While most participants did report that their thinking began to change with regard to classroom processes, that is, teaching and learning, they were often uncomfortable with that developing change. Their discomfort apparently proceeded from their feeling that the concept demanded some implementation effort on their part, but they were uncertain as to how to accomplish it.

2. The sharing of books and articles by the authors with the participants generated a substantial interest in teaching and learning on the latter's part--far more than was expected. They said, in effect, that their reading

3 The findings are presented in near-outline form in this draft, as they will be discussed orally at the paper session. Those wishing a copy of the final research report, available around the end of January, 1991, may contact the authors at the Department of Educational Leadership, Brigham Young University.

contributed notably to their development of personal meaning about thoughtful schools.

3. One administrator reported that she now conceives of the possibility of school change, in her building, along the lines of the proposed innovation --something that, formerly, she had not believed possible. Another expressed the notion that because of what he was coming to believe about the work of the mind and because of the setting in which the notion was put forward, he was getting out of the "blue collar" role in which he thought administrators often found themselves.

4. Respondents' answers to the ethnographer's questions about their development of personal meaning are surprisingly diverse--they are not "canned," nor do they repeat the words the authors used during the seminars. Additionally, they are not superficial, not obvious (one of them said, "It's like Madeline Hunter's lesson design turned upside down--we get the children to come up with the design").

We interpret this phenomenon to mean that participants did, in fact, consider the ideas treated and come to grips with them on (and in) their own terms.

5. There is a general feeling of guilt among participants that they are not "doing anything about" the idea of thoughtful teaching and learning. On the other hand, in the course of the interviews they reveal that they have internalized the concept to such a degree that they are actually implementing it. In some way they are not consciously connecting their actions in their

schools vis-a-vis thoughtfulness with their newly-learned perspective on it; however, they are in fact making changes in their buildings that are congruent with the idea of mindful teaching and learning.

6. The authors report that they detect a change in the task-orientation of the participants over the several months of the seminars: Whereas all of them were notably task-oriented at the beginning, some now are expressing reservations about undertaking a new task without "thinking about it" (developing personal meaning) first.

Modeling the proposed Change

1. In general, although participants did not remark explicitly about the modeling effort of the authors, their own preliminary ideas about working with their own faculties follow the same pattern as the seminar model. They are adapting mindful characteristics of the sessions to their own purposes. Several participants did report that the interaction at the seminars is at a (positive) level quite distinct from standard inservice lessons or consultant presentations.

Collegiality

1. The majority of those interviewed to date consider the collegiality of the change effort to be unique as well as central to the value of the experience.

2. That value of collegiality has resulted in considerable outside-of-seminar activity by them. An informal network has sprung up and there is a good deal of "down-line" sharing of points from the seminars--with each other, with friends from other schools, and with their own teachers and other

staff members. One administrator noted that there is no other format as useful as a "mixed" seminar--university, district, elementary, and secondary personnel--for dealing with ideas about higher-order thinking in schools.

3. Participants are nervous as they consider what will be needed if they decide to implement the innovation in their schools. Their comments suggest that although they consider the establishment of collegial relationships as perhaps one powerful way to enact the seminar ideas in their schools, they envision other possiblities.

Time Allowed for Change

1. Time is a constant preoccupation of the participants. Generally, they are somewhat discouraged about their inability to bring off some form of practice of the idea of thoughtful teaching and learning immediately.

2. Participants have misconstrued the idea of time, in the view of the researchers: The principals seem to feel that although they have not been pressed (either by the district leaders or the authors) for achievement of a certain outcome within a certain time limit, that they are in fact so obligated. This is a discrepancy we do not fully understand. We offer below two alternative resolutions of the discrepancy, pending a fuller consideration of the issue.

First, perhaps the administrators are responding to what is assuredly a system-wide regularity: When one goes to a district-sponsored learning occasion, one must then implement something as a result. There is, in other

words, a kind of programmatic mind-set among educators generally that "requires" direct, almost reflexive action after exposure to a new idea.

Second, perhaps the personal meaning given by the participants to the central idea of the change effort has reached such a depth that they feel themselves impelled to enact that vision. Knowing, as they do, that thoughtfulness, especially, can not be brought about mindlessly, the participants are yet without an acceptable "thoughtful" way to implement it. Thus, they are frustrated by self-imposed pressure to put it into effect.

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